FOR REFERENCE ONLY

INDIANA COLLECTION
Portage

2100 Willow Creek Rd
Portage IN 46368

Portage Community Historical Society

WELCOME TO COUNTRYSIDE MUSEUM

A Short History of Portage Township

by Gene Youngman

Due to it's location at the southern end of our great lake, Portage Township has been traversed for eons by travelers and explorers. The first Europeans through were French fur traders in the mid 17th century. Marquette floated by, on Lake Michigan, in 1675 and LaSalle in 1681. Spanish and American expeditions against the British passed through during our Revolution. This area was not taken from the Potawatomi until 1826 and 1832. They were forcibly removed in 1840.

A smaller, than at present, Portage Twp. was created in 1836 from Ross Twp. Over the next several decades, our northern six square miles were taken from Westchester Twp. and one of our original square miles was lost to Westchester. Thus Odgen Dunes used to be in Westchester, and western Burns Harbor was in Portage Twp. Our Township was named for Portage County, Ohio.

The Lake Michigan Beach became an official federal road in 1825. Stagecoaches were running in 1833. The Chicago-Detroit Road moved inland in 1837, following US 20, west of Willowcreek Road, and parts of Clem and Marquette roads. A spur to Merrillville branched off at Samuelson and the Little Calumet. McCool Road is a straightened replacement of that route. A road from Valparaiso crossed the southwestern township a couple miles north of today's highway 130, passing near this museum. Another animal trace/Indian trail/pioneer road generally followed much of Stagecoach Road.

The Michigan Central was the first railroad through Portage in 1851. The Buffalo and Mississippi was chartered in 1835 but did not reach this far west. The New York Central finally passed across in 1851. The Pennsylvania followed in 1858, the B&O in 1874, Nickel Plate-1881, EJ&E-1888, Wabash-1895, South Shore-1908, Gary streetcar line-1912, and the I.H.B.

In 1834, Jacob Wolf settled in southern Portage Twp., on the 20-Mile Prairie, with his family. His son, Josephus, built the Wolf Mansion in 1875. The Dorrs, Hurlburts, Spurlocks, and Parrotts also moved to this township in 1834. This area was part of LaPorte County then. Other early families were Robbins, James, Blake, Ritter, Harrison, Smith, Arnold, McCool, and Field. Several homes here are reputedly built around old fur traders cabins. As the population increased, the eagles, wolves and bears disappeared.

Portage Twp's first school was built in 1840 on Robbins Road. Religious societies were organized by 1837, with a church built in 1852. Mr. Carley opened an inn on Clem Road near Willow Creek in 1837 to provide food and lodging for travelers to Chicago. In 1849, a post office opened at Filmore, north of Wheeler. A sawmill was built in the dunes by 1852. Once the surrounding timber was removed, the mill was left and a new one built elsewhere. Crisman got a Post Office and a grocery store in 1871. A factory west of South Haven began making cheese and butter about 1876.

Portage Township can boast a number of ghost towns. Pokagon's tribe of Potawatomies had a village in Portage. Manchester was platted near an Indian effigy mound in 1837. It never amounted to much and now consists only of a sandmine, farmland, and I-94. South of Crocker, Athens was recorded a week later. Lakeside was platted in 1882. Michigan Central Junction became the small community of Willow Creek. McCool, whose Post Office dates to 1884, is also still a neighborhood of Portage. Long Lake was a railroad stop by 1884. Vineland was laid out in 1888. Dock Siding and Dune Park appeared on maps by 1889. Health's Addition to East Chicago was platted in 1891. Part of that village remains, southwest of the Crisman Road bridge. Calumet Park was just recently vacated. The Lake Front Addition to East Chicago and Fairview still have several homes. Jackson Park was also recorded that boom year.

Paul was a railroad stop by 1909. So was Wickliffe which was developed as Ogden Dunes in 1923 and incorporated as a town in 1925. Colley's 1st Addition to East Gary was laid out in 1910. Much of it remains. Garyton was recorded in 1912, Colley's 2nd Addition in 1913, and Gavit's Addition to Gary in 1920. All still exist on Portage's west side. What became South Haven was originally promoted as the St. Michael American-Russian Orphan Home and Institution and Seven Oaks subdivisions in 1920 and 1925. Garden City was a brickyard and small village around SR130.